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SOME IMPRESSIONS OF MY ELDERS

“A. E.”

BY ST. JOHN ERVINE

I

IN all the books on Ireland, considered nationally, socially and economically, that have been written in the past twenty years, two men inevitably are mentioned: Sir Horace Plunkett and “A. E.”, whose lawful name is George William Russell. Men of affairs in most parts of the world have heard of them, and I imagine that very few of the people who go to Ireland with any serious purpose fail to visit them. I saw Sir Horace Plunkett receive an ovation from a large audience in New York which would only have been given to him by a people who had some knowledge and appreciation of his work for his country; and I was impressed by the fact that many Americans asked me to tell them something of “A. E.” And yet, though the wide world is not ignorant of their worth, it is very likely that they are less generally known in Ireland than some paltry politician with a gift for street-corner rhetoric. Once, in Dublin, I praised Sir Horace Plunkett to a man from the county of Cavan who interrupted me to say that no one in his village had ever heard of Sir Horace. He seemed to imagine that the ignorance of his neighbours proved a demerit in the founder of the co-operative movement in Ireland. Your villagers, said I, may never have heard of Sir Horace Plunkett and are probably very familiar with the names of Mr. Charles Chaplin and Miss Mary Pickford, but does that prove that Mr. Chaplin has done greater work for Ireland than Sir Horace? I am not indifferent to the great merits of Mr. Chaplin. . . . I would go a long way to see him in the movies . . . but I hope that I shall never succumb to this modern shoddy democracy which will not believe that a man possesses quality unless

his name is printed frequently in the newspapers and is familiarly known to the rabble. It may be that Paudeen, unfit to do more than "fumble in a greasy till," as Mr. Yeats wrote in his bitter poem, "September, 1913," knows little or nothing of Sir Horace Plunkett whose life labors have brought so much of comfort and prosperity to him—but who cares what Paudeen knows? Let him grub in the soil, as God made him to grub, while men of mind and quality look after his affairs. It is sufficient for the knowledgeable minority that *they* know of Sir Horace and realize the value of the great work he has done for his country. A false optimism bids us to believe that "we needs must love the highest when we see it," but a sense of reality convinces us that the highest has to fight harder for recognition than the lowest, and that the way to the throne of heaven passes through Golgotha, the place of a skull.

II

If it be true that Sir Horace Plunkett is less well known to his countrymen than some fellow with flashy wits, it is more certain to be true that his great colleague in co-operation, "A. E.", is still less known to them. It would be difficult for any intelligent person to come into the presence of "A. E." and remain unaware that he is a man of merit. He fills a room immediately and unmistakably with the power of his personality. A tall, bearded, untidy man, with full lips and bulkily built body, he draws attention by his deep, glowing brown eyes. When he speaks, other people listen. If you were to meet him in the street, unaware of his indenty, and he were to ask you for a match with which to light his pipe, you would do more than civilly comply with his request. You would certainly say to yourself, "That's a remarkable man!" It is said, with what verity I cannot say, that Mr. Bernard Shaw and "A. E." met for the first time in a picture-gallery in Dublin, each ignorant of the other's identity, and that they began to talk of Art. They impressed each other so greatly that they continued in argument for a long time, and only, when they parted, did they become known to each other. The mountains nod to each other over the heads of the little hills; and men of merit, even when they are not easily recognized by the multitude, are known to each other. One man of merit may, indeed, belittle another man of merit, as Dr. Johnson

belittled Fielding, as George Meredith belittled Dickens, as Henry James belittled Ibsen and Thomas Hardy; but at least they are aware of each other.

III

Very often have writers told the story of how Sir Horace Plunkett, a tongue-tied, hesitant man with very delicate health, returned to Ireland after a long stay in America, to begin the Co-operative Movement, and found, in a Dublin shop, keeping accounts for a tea-merchant, a poet and a painter, a mystic who was also an economist with the capacity, as he afterwards proved, to become the ablest journalist in Ireland. This man of multiple energies was George William Russell, who was born in Lurgan, in the County of Armagh, on April 10, 1867. He is two years younger than Mr. Yeats, eleven years younger than Mr. Shaw, and fifteen years younger than Mr. George Moore. The order of these births is significant. Observe how an aloof artist has been succeeded by a furious economist! Mr. Moore, who began life as a realist after the manner, but not after the style, of Zola, and then turned his back on Zola and sought the company of Turgeniev so that he might pursue apt and beautiful words and delicate and elusive thoughts, was followed by Mr. Shaw, who began life by filling his mind with the ideas of Henry George and Karl Marx, and then turned his back on both of them in order that he might consort with Mr. Sidney Webb. Mr. Yeats, with his vague poetry and vaguer mysticism . . . none the less vague because of the curious care for exactness which causes him to count the nine and fifty swans at Coole and the nine bean rows on Innisfree . . . followed Mr. Shaw, and in his turn was followed by "A. E.", so closely connected with economics that a wag, when asked what was the meaning of "A. E."s pen-name, replied "agricultural economist".*

One cannot, however, leave the matter as simply as that. Mr. Shaw likes to think of himself as an economist, but he

* Mr. Darrell Figgis, in his book on "A. E.", explains the pen-name thus: "Wanting at one time a new pen-name, he subscribed himself as Aeon. His penmanship not at all times being of the legiblest, the printer deciphered the first diphthong and set a query for the rest; whereupon the writer, in his proof-sheets, stroked out the query and stood by the diphthong." Since then, however, Mr. Russell has abandoned the diphthong and prints his pen-name as two separate letters.

is more than an economist; he is John the Baptist pretending to be Karl Marx. "A. E." likes to think of himself as an expert on the price of butter and milk and cows and sheep, but he is more than an expert on these things: he is Blake pretending to be Sir Horace Plunkett . . . or Walt Whitman pretending to be President Wilson. It has always seemed to me that Sir Horace Plunkett and "A. E.", colleagues in a great enterprise, are the embodiment of the peculiarly interwoven strands of Irish character, of that queer mingling of the material and the spiritual in the Irish people which at once allures and astounds the Englishman, accustomed to keeping his materialism and his spirituality in separate compartments. Sir Horace has a neat and unexpected wit, but he does not appear to me to have much feeling for poetry or for any other literature or art. He has respect for these things and will talk on them sometimes with a very peculiar incisiveness, but his interest in them is an outside interest. If he had to choose between a co-operative creamery and the Heroic Legends of Ireland, I do not doubt for a moment that he would choose the co-operative creamery. "A. E.", on the contrary, would choose the Heroic Legends and would give the good reason for so doing that without the Heroic Legends, the co-operative creamery is useless. When "A. E." pleads for the co-operative societies, he does so because he believes that these are part of the means whereby the Irish people will be restored to their ancient stature. Organize your industry, he said to the farmers, so that you may become what your fathers were, fit company for the Shining Ones, for Lugh and Balor and Manannan, the great and brave and beautiful Pagan gods. Each by himself, Sir Horace or "A. E.", might have failed to make much out of the co-operative movement in Ireland, but both together, each possessed of a different, yet complementary, crusading spirit, could not fail to make a happy issue of it. When Garibaldi appealed for recruits for his Thousand, he offered them wounds and death. When Sir Horace Plunkett appealed for helpers in the Irish Agricultural Organization Society, he offered them hard and discouraging labor and poor wages. Mankind, which responds to a noble appeal as readily as it responds to a base appeal, offered its best to both of them. Garibaldi got his Thousand, and Sir Horace Plunkett got his colleagues.

They were diverse in character, and included National-

ists and Unionists, Catholics and Protestants, peers and peasants. For the first time in Irish history, Irishmen of all classes were united on a matter which had no relationship with passions! There were no angry emotions astir when the I. A. O. S. brought the diverse elements of the Irish entity into accord as there had been when the union of the North and the South was made many years earlier; and consequently the movement could not be split, as that Union was, by the collision of one angry emotion with another. In face of every conceivable discouragement and even of active enmity and in spite of the grave unhealth of Sir Horace himself, the movement grew in strength until now it is indestructible. Chief among the colleagues whom Sir Horace gathered about him was "A. E." Mr. Russell could, without doubt, earn a large income as a journalist if he were to offer his pen to a rich newspaper proprietor . . . his weekly review, the *Irish Homestead*, is the most ably-edited and skilfully-written organ in Ireland . . . and he could probably earn as much as, if not more than, he receives from his Co-operative work if he were to devote himself exclusively to his mystical and poetical writings; but just as Mazzini felt himself compelled to sacrifice his heart's desire, the life of a man of letters, in order to devote himself to a political career which was distasteful to him, so "A. E." felt compelled to hitch his star to Sir Horace Plunkett's wagon, and for many years now he has preached, week after week, the gospel of co-operation to Irish farmers when he would, perhaps, have preferred exclusively to tell stories of the ancient gods and heroes.

IV

But the Co-operative Movement did not absorb the whole of his energies. He is as many-sided a man as William Morris was, almost as many-sided as Leonardo da Vinci. His work on the *Irish Homestead* would seem to be sufficient to employ all the vitality of a healthy, active man, but "A. E." cannot be contained within the pages of a weekly review, and so, while writing four or five pages every week of the finest journalism to be found in the British Islands, he has also produced seven remarkable books and painted many pictures, engaged in political and economic controversy, and sat as a member of the Irish Convention

which endeavoured, in 1917, to discover a solution of the Irish Problem. In a strange and, to me, incomprehensible book, called *The Candle of Vision*, he has wrought his mysticism to such a pitch of practicality that he is able to offer his readers an alphabet with which to interpret the language of the Gods! It manifests itself in some of his pictures, so that strange, luminous and brightly-coloured creatures are seen shining in some ordinary landscape, creatures that seemed to me, when I first saw them, akin to Red Indians. In everything that he writes and does, there is a consciousness of some spiritual presence, not the spiritual presence of the Christian theology, but that of the Pagan Legends. One night, in his house in Dublin, I drew the attention of a lady to one of "A. E."s pictures . . . a dark landscape, in the centre of which a very brilliant and beautiful creature was dancing. "A. E." turned to us and said, "That's the one I saw!" and I remembered the story I had been told earlier in the evening, that he saw fairies, that he actually took penny tram-rides from Dublin to go up into the mountains to see the fairies! I do not remember what the lady said, but I remember that she looked exceedingly astonished, and, indeed, I myself felt some astonishment. If Mr. Yeats had said that he had seen a fairy, I should have smiled indulgently and should neither have believed that he had seen one nor that he himself believed that he had seen one. But while I do not believe that "A. E." saw a fairy, otherwise than in his imagination, I am certain that he believes he saw one, not as a creature of the mind, but as one having flesh and blood. He claims no peculiar merit for himself in seeing visions. "There is no personal virtue in me," he writes in *The Candle of Vision*, "other than this that I followed a path all may travel but on which few do journey." He tells his readers how they, too, if they have the wish, may see the things which he has seen, and he gives descriptions of some of his visions. People as incredulous as I am can very easily dispose of "A. E."s visions as the fantasies of a man suffering perhaps from inadequate nourishment . . . for "A. E." was careless about his meals in those days . . . just as I dispose of the visions of St. Catherine of Sienna by attributing them to the feverishness of mind that comes to people who are starving themselves. Here is an account of one of his visions. You are to understand that it is not a dream such

as you and I have when we are asleep, but something seen by a man who is awake at broad of day, something actual, something that you who read this might also see if you were to follow the path on which he has travelled:

So did I feel one warm summer day lying idly on the hillside, not then thinking of anything but the sunlight, and how sweet it was to drowse there, when, suddenly, I felt a fiery heart throb, and knew it was personal and intimate, and started with every sense dilated and intent, and turned inwards, and I heard first a music as of bells going away, away into that wondrous underland whither, as legend relates, the Danaan gods withdrew; and then the heart of the hills was opened to me, and I knew there was no hill for those who were there, and they were unconscious of the ponderous mountain piled above the palaces of light, and the winds were sparkling and diamond clear, yet full of color as an opal, as they glittered through the valley, and I knew the Golden Age was all about me, and it was we who had been blind to it but that it had never passed away from the world.

The Golden Age is here, at this moment, and all the noble creatures who filled it with chivalry and beauty are crowding about us. We have only to open our eyes and we shall see! . . .

Once, suddenly, I found myself on some remote plain or steppe, and heard unearthly chimes pealing passionately from I know not what far steeples. The earth-breath streamed from the furrows to the glowing heavens. Overhead the birds flew round and round crying their incomprehensible cries, as if they were maddened, and knew not where to nestle, and had dreams of some more enraptured rest in a diviner home. I could see a ploughman lift himself from his obscure toil and stand with lit eyes as if he too had been fire-smitten and was caught into heaven as I was, and knew for that moment he was a god.

It is very vague, the disbeliever feels, and there is nothing in it to make one accept it as a vision of a thing actually seen, rather than fancied; but there can be no doubt of the intensity with which "A. E." believes in the actuality of it. These visions of his form the foundation of his political and economic faith. He advocates co-operative enterprise because he believes in his visions as actual happenings. In a poem, called *Earth Breath*, he says:

From the cool and dark-lipped furrows breathes a dim delight
Through the woodland's purple plumage to the diamond night.
Aureoles of joy encircle every blade of grass
Where the dew-fed creatures silent and enraptured pass.
And the restless ploughman pauses, turns, and, wondering,
Deep beneath his rustic habit finds himself a king.

This verse is obviously a poetical account of the experience he underwent "on some remote plain or steppe," and

the final couplet of it gives the explanation of his belief in democracy. If he had no faith in the god in man, if he were not certain that "the restless ploughman . . . deep beneath his rustic habit finds himself a king," he would probably offer his allegiance to autocracy and believe in government by a caste; but since he has seen visions and is convinced that there is a god in man, he cannot be other than a democrat. All his political strivings have been directed towards making this "a society where people will be at harmony in their economic life," as he writes in *The National Being*, and "will readily listen to different opinions from their own, will not turn sour faces on those who do not think as they do, but will, by reason and sympathy, comprehend each other, and come at last, through sympathy and affection, to a balancing of their diversities, as in that multitudinous diversity which is the universe, powers and dominions and elements are balanced, and are guided harmoniously by the Shepherd of the Ages." Whether such a world, balanced in that way, can be rightly described as a democracy is not a matter on which I offer any opinion here, though it seems to me to be a very long way from what the common man considers a democracy to be.

V

It is when we come to connect his visions and the beliefs he derives from them with the actual circumstances in which we find ourselves that we begin to be most dubious. "National ideals," he says in *The National Being*, "are the possession of a few people only." That is an argument for aristocracy.

Yet we must spread them in wide commonalty over Ireland if we are to create a civilisation worthy of our hopes and our ages of struggle and sacrifice to attain the power to build. We must spread them in wide commonalty because it is certain that democracy will prevail in Ireland. The aristocratic classes with traditions of government, the manufacturing classes with economic experience, will alike be secondary in Ireland to the small farmers and the wage-earners in the towns. We must rely on the ideas common among our people, and on their power to discern among their countrymen the aristocracy of character and intellect.

With the deletion of the word "Ireland" and the substitution of the word "America," that quotation might stand just as effectively for the United States as for Ireland. Why is it certain that democracy will prevail in Ireland?

Because the small farmers and the wage-earners in the towns will take precedence over the aristocracy and the manufacturing classes! I do not follow that argument. I have seen nothing in England or America or Ireland or France to convince me that if the small farmers and the wage-earners in the towns were authoritative they would be any more democratic than the aristocrats or the manufacturing classes. I have seen much to make me feel certain that they will use their authority as implacably in their own interests as any aristocrat or manufacturer ever used or ever will use his. Mr. G. K. Chesterton, in his book, *Irish Impressions*, produces this argument in favor of peasant proprietorship:

It may be that international Israel will launch against us out of the East an insane simplification of the unity of Man, as Islam once launched out of the East an insane simplification of the unity of God. If it be so, it is where property is well distributed that it will be well defended. The post of honor will be with those who fight in very truth for their own land.

It is indisputable that a peasant will fight for his own land, the tiny portion which he owns and cultivates, but will he fight for another man's land when that man is unjustly to be bereft of it? There is nothing meritable in a man who fights for his own goods and lands, nor does it seem to me that a peasant will fight for his potato-patch with any greater determination than a shareholder in a railroad will fight for the interest on his capital. There certainly is not anything more noble or chivalrous in the peasant's desire to keep possession of his means of livelihood than there is in that of the Liberty Bondholder. The test of honor is, not what will you do for yourself, but what will you do for other men? The French peasant proprietors, the Pennsylvania Dutch, the Irish peasant proprietors may offer a guarantee of stability to society, but the offer may carry with it obstinate reaction and a gross disregard of the rights of those who are not possessors of land. It will not guarantee the landless man against exploitation in the price of food in times of war and necessity. It offers singularly little hope that "national ideals" will be spread in wide commonalty, if the peasants can help it. "A. E." will urge, perhaps, that while "national ideals are the possession of a few people only," they may be spread in wide commonalty if the "few people" will make the effort to spread them. The soil lies ready for the seed. But what is there in human affairs to

justify any man in assuming that the mass of men are likely to be long-suffering in idealism? Is it not a fact of human nature that even when the multitude has been stirred to some act of exaltation, the staying power of the multitude has not been sufficient to maintain the exalted mood long enough to render the reactionaries hopeless? Where are the generous ideals of 1914 now? Has not the war that was to end war made war seem more probable? Is not the world at this moment suffering to the point of distraction because the multitude cannot live up to its own ideals long enough to make them practical? "The gods departed," says "A. E.," "the half-gods also, hero and saint after that, and we [i. e. the Irish people] have dwindled down to a petty peasant nationality, rural and urban life alike mean in their externals." But he does not despair. "Yet the cavalcade, for all its tattered habiliments, has not lost spiritual dignity." And he hopes "the incorruptible atom" in us will make us great again. Divine optimism, but what is there in a peasant society to justify it?

VI

Sometimes I say to myself that "A. E." has lived too long and too exclusively in Ireland. He is not free from the mush of sentimentality with which Irishmen regard themselves, this everlasting self-congratulation that Irishmen are not as Englishmen, this smug preoccupation with their own virtues and bland disregard of their vices, this eternal denial that they have any demerits. One has only to listen to people in Dublin prating about the Irish Literary Renaissance and then to go and examine the results of it, to discover what a tiny mouse that mountain has produced. If the Irish people are to recover the dignity and the stature of the gods, they must display god-like qualities or prove that they possess them. It is not sufficient to assert that they possess these qualities, at the same time denying them by nagging continually at their neighbors. How can I believe in the god-like quality of my countrymen when Ireland, during the war, seemed to me like an hysterical woman who rushes into the presence of a man bleeding to death and cries, "My God, I've got toothache!" I have wished at times that "A. E." could be removed from the atmosphere of adulation which envelopes him in Dublin, and sent, without letters of introduction, on a tour round the world. He has prob-

ably travelled less than any other educated man in Ireland. He passes from his home in Rathmines, a suburb of Dublin, to the office of the *Irish Homestead* in Merrion Square, from one centre of adulation to another, with occasional visits to the home of James Stephens, where he meets the same people that visit him on Sunday nights, or to the Hermetic Society, where he meets them again. He is too fine a spirit to be seriously affected by the paltry gabble of the third-rate minds he encounters on most occasions in Dublin, and perhaps it hardly matters that he seldom leaves Dublin and hardly ever leaves Ireland; but even so rare a man as "A. E." must suffer contraction within the narrow limits of Dublin. He has resources that few men possess: a quiet mind, a vivid faith and the love and respect of very dissimilar people. He can turn from the consideration of agricultural prices in the *Irish Homestead* to the esoteric alphabet with which he speaks to the Gods, or he can go off to the wild mountains of Donegal and paint pictures. When painting no longer delights him, he can spend his nights and days in making poems. He is extravagantly generous to young writers, giving greater praise to them sometimes than they deserve, giving less of criticism than is necessary. There are minor poets in Dublin, authors of thin books of thin verse, who have persuaded themselves, because of "A. E.'s" praise, that they are more meritable than they are. There are people in Dublin who seem to believe that Ireland has produced a greater literature than England and will denounce you as a traitor to your country if you protest that she cannot show poets of the stature of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Browning and Tennyson, with the exception of Mr. Yeats. I am the sort of patriot who would like to see his country raise herself to the level of other countries, but I am not the sort of patriot who will pretend that she is on the level of England and France and Germany when, in fact, she is far below it. "A. E." is not entirely free from blame for this. He could have given Ireland a sense of proportion, had he cared to do so.

VII

In the room in which I am writing this article, there is a picture by "A. E." It shows an ascending road on the side of a mountain. There is rain in the air, and the road has a

lonely, unfrequented look. Yet, though there is no living creature visible in the picture, Life fills it. I feel sometimes when I sit back in my chair and look at "The Mountain Road" that there are divine beings behind the bushes, that if I could only climb up that road and turn the corner of the mountain, I should come upon the Golden Age. Is it not ungracious to make complaint, even if the complaint be a slight one, of a man who can make the invisible world so powerfully felt as that? And if he persuades me, by nature sceptical, almost to believe in the Shining Ones, how much more strong must his influence be on those who are eager to believe! When the evil temper which possesses Ireland at this moment has subsided, the fine temper of "A. E." will rise again and call Irishmen to a kindlier mood. The little town of Lurgan, in which he was born, is notorious in Ulster for the harshness of its religious dissensions. A base bigotry flourishes there. It is in the nature of things that from a place of great bitterness should have come a man of reconciliation, bidding Catholic and Protestant to meet, not in Geneva or in Rome, but on the holy hills of Ireland, under the protection of the ancient gods.

ST. JOHN ERVINE.